August 21, 2009

This document provides general guidance and specific recommendations from the New Teacher Center for its partners and interested stakeholders to consider incorporating in their official public comments to the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Race to the Top *Notice of Proposed Priorities*, due August 28, 2009. ED's proposed guidelines are available at: http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html.

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Introduction
The New Teacher Center (NTC) is a national non-profit organization dedicated to improving student learning by accelerating the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders. Since 1998, NTC has strengthened school communities through proven mentoring and professional development programs, online learning environments, policy advocacy, and essential research.

While our primary focus remains new teacher induction, NTC also has expertise in school leadership development, policy development, and teaching and learning conditions. Through our work with states and school district partners, NTC also has one of the most expansive datasets that can be used to help education stakeholders make decisions that positively impact teacher quality, teacher recruitment and retention, school leadership, and most importantly, student achievement.

NTC has tremendous experience as an organization in developing effective teachers and strong school leaders. It has available capacity to assist states and districts in helping schools to strengthen human capital development and implement effective school-based instructional and leadership practices.

Guide to this Document
Section I presents NTC's recommendations for improving the proposed guidelines from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) for the Race to the Top (RttT) competitive grant competition, authorized in the education section of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

Section II presents elaborates on each of the recommendations and provides rationale for NTC partners and interested stakeholders to inform their official comments that will improve the RttT grant process and subsequent reform efforts.

Section I. Recommendations

The U.S. Department of Education (ED), in its Race to the Top (RttT) competitive grant competition, requires states to place four reform areas at the heart of their applications. *Section 14006(a)(2)* of the ARRA requires states to have made significant progress in the following four education reform areas in order to receive a grant:

- Implementing standards and assessments
- Improving teacher effectiveness and achieving equity in teacher distribution
- Improving collection and use of data
- Supporting struggling schools.

Improving Teacher Effectiveness and Achieving Equity in Teacher Distribution

- The RttT guidelines should include a definition of teacher effectiveness that acknowledges and supports the development of teacher and principal practice, especially during the early years. New teachers and principals, who disproportionately work in struggling schools, need strong mentoring and support to become effective.
- The RttT guidelines should define 'effective principal' more expansively, drawing upon additional measures of student success and data on teaching and learning conditions to fully reflect the impact of teachers, school leaders, and school environment on student learning.
- The RttT guidelines should require states to address school leadership development and teaching and learning conditions in their strategies to improve teacher effectiveness and the equitable distribution of quality teachers.

Improving Collection and Use of Data

- RttT guidelines should specifically include teaching and learning conditions data gathered from practitioners to help schools, districts and states better understand supports and barriers to teacher effectiveness and equitable teacher distribution, and to incorporate this information into their longitudinal P-20 data systems.

Section II. Recommendations in detail

NTC offers the following recommendations for strengthening the RttT guidelines for the consideration of our partners and interested stakeholders as they compose their public comments to the ED. Our partners are encouraged to emphasize efforts underway with NTC in each area below citing the successes and documented research findings.

RttT Education Reform Area: Improving Teacher Effectiveness and Achieving Equity in Teacher Distribution

Area 1 – Defining teacher effectiveness
The proposed guidelines define "effective teacher" as "a teacher whose students achieve acceptable rates (*e.g.,* at least one grade level in an academic year) of student growth (as defined in this notice). States may supplement this definition as they see fit so long as teacher effectiveness is judged, in significant measure, by student growth (as defined in this notice)." *74 Fed. Reg. at 37811*

Recommendation:
The RttT guidelines should include a definition of teacher effectiveness that acknowledges and supports the development of teacher and principal practice, especially during the early years. New teachers and principals, who disproportionately work in struggling schools, need strong mentoring and support to become effective.

Teacher effectiveness in the proposed RttT guidelines focuses exclusively on value-added student assessments. While value-added student achievement data can be used to reward and recognize certain achievements by educators, it should not be the sole method by which teachers are evaluated, observed, rewarded, and deemed "effective." Firing the least effective teachers and rewarding the most effective alone is short-sighted and ignores the vast majority of teachers in the middle who can achieve greater success if given access to high-quality induction and professional development, strong and supportive school administrators, and opportunities for collaboration and leadership. Great teachers are made – not born. Teachers need professional support and opportunities to develop their practice, including focused induction during their initial years in the profession. It is important to measure teacher impact on student learning, but measuring impact without providing the means to help educators strengthen their practice will ultimately fail our schools.

The NTC's formative assessment systems (FAS) can support districts interested in increasing teacher effectiveness. Beginning teacher FAS, mentor teacher FAS, teacher evaluation FAS, and school leader FAS can help build a more complete picture of teacher effectiveness than student assessment data alone. Through the use of these tools, high-quality induction programs and job-embedded professional development rapidly advance teacher practice.

It is important to not only identify effective teaching, but provide teachers guidance and support to become more effective. Numerous states have developed definitions of effective teaching that incorporate essential knowledge, skills and classroom practices, and which do not rely exclusively on outcome-based measures such as student achievement. Effective teaching includes aspects of teacher leadership, the ability to embrace diversity and individual learning characteristics, and content knowledge. Planning instruction to meet the needs of all students, provide relevant instruction, make connection across content areas, develop effective communication, and foster critical thinking skills are measures of teacher effectiveness as well. If RttT is to be an effective reform strategy, it needs to recognize teacher development as a primary means to maximize classroom effectiveness. RttT should require states not merely to identify the best teachers, but see that their successes form the building blocks of a better understanding of effective teaching practice that can be replicated in classrooms across America.

Area 2 – Data for school improvement
Student achievement data alone does not provide school leaders the information they need to produce continuous improvement within their schools. The proposed guidelines emphasize student data as the sole measure of success. For example, the definition of effective principal "means a principal whose students, overall and for each subgroup (described in section 1111(b)(2)(C)(v)(II) of the ESEA), demonstrate acceptable rates (*e.g.,* at least one grade level in an academic year) of student growth (as defined in this notice). States may supplement this definition as they see fit so long as principal effectiveness is judged, in significant measure, by student growth (as defined in this notice)." *74 Fed.Reg. at 37811*. However, there are no strategies or requirements to show how states should identify "effective principals" when, in fact, we know from research that quality school leaders utilize student data in combination with other data to inform practice within their schools.

Recommendation:
The RttT guidelines should define 'effective principal' more expansively, drawing upon additional measures of student success and data on teaching and learning conditions to fully reflect the impact of teachers, school leaders, and school environment on student learning.

In order for school leaders to attract and retain quality teachers, research shows the need for school leaders to make decisions based on data that incorporate the perspective of classroom teachers. Teacher survey data can provide insight into the school culture, how decisions are made, and the use of instructional and planning time for teachers. Such contextual data may explain differences in teacher effectiveness between schools and districts. NTC has worked with over 300,000 educators in 10 states, and collected teaching and learning conditions data from over 8,000 schools to utilize in school improvement plans. In North Carolina, the State Board of Education now requires schools to utilize the data from the biennial working conditions survey to inform annual improvement plans and strategies.

Area 3 – School leadership
The RttT guidelines place too little emphasis on changing policy and practice related to school leadership which is one of the fundamental cornerstones for improving student success. If RttT is to contribute to successful long-term school reform, the role of quality school leadership as a component of teacher effectiveness needs to be addressed explicitly. RttT combines both teachers and leaders into one group rather than focusing on key strategies for each to be effective.

Recommendation:
The RttT guidelines should require states to address school leadership development and teaching and learning conditions in their strategies to improve teacher effectiveness and the equitable distribution of quality teachers.

Quality teachers will seek out and stay with strong supportive school leaders; therefore, using RttT funds for salary bonuses in hard-to-staff schools would not be the most effective approach. RttT should encourage states to show how they are using data from teachers, along with student achievement and other relevant data, to develop policies for these schools, strengthen school leadership, and ensure that they are settings where the most effective teachers want to work and can succeed.

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RttT Education Reform Area: Improving Collection and Use of Data

Area 4 – Use of data

Through our intensive work with educators and our teacher working conditions initiative, NTC appreciates the value of gathering data directly and anonymously from practitioners to inform local and state decision-making processes and improve school leadership. NTC also knows that such data, when used in combination with other data sets that report teacher turnover rates, student achievement, and graduation rates, is critical in understanding influences on teacher effectiveness. Yet, there is no mention of requiring states to gather data directly from practitioners and place it in their longitudinal data system.

> (See reform "Plan Criteria (B)(2) *Accessing and using State data"* – The following users and descriptions are listed: "The extent to which the State has a high-quality plan to ensure that data from the State's statewide longitudinal data system are accessible to, and used to inform and engage, as appropriate, key stakeholders (*e.g.,* parents, students, teachers, principals, LEA leaders, community members, unions, researchers, and policymakers); that the data support decision-makers in the continuous improvement of instruction, operations, management, and resource allocation; and that they comply with the applicable requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). (B)(3) *Using data to improve instruction:* The extent to which the State, in collaboration with its participating LEAs, has a high-quality plan to— (i) Increase the use of instructional improvement systems (as defined in this notice) that provide teachers, principals, and administrators with the information they need to inform and improve their instructional practices, decision making, and overall effectiveness" *74 Fed.Reg. at 37809.***)**

Recommendation:

RttT guidelines should specifically include teaching and learning conditions data gathered from practitioners to help schools, districts and states better understand supports and barriers to teacher effectiveness and equitable teacher distribution, and to incorporate this information into their longitudinal P-20 data systems.

NTC's extensive research has shown that data obtained from anonymous teacher and principal teaching and learning conditions surveys provides tremendous assistance to leaders in schools, districts and states to assist in developing improvement plans and strategies. The data from these surveys has consistently demonstrated the connection between quality school leadership and improved student achievement, teacher recruitment and retention, and can assist struggling schools and districts in developing reform plans for improved student performance. Such data, when collected appropriately, helps schools and districts build strong supportive systems over time.

For more information

If you have questions or need more information about the New Teacher Center and the Race to the Top grant competition, please contact Liam Goldrick, Director of Policy (608.345.6044; lgoldrick@ newteachercenter.org), or contact the NTC main office (831.600.2200; info@newteachercenter.org).

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